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January 20, 2012 10:02 pm

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The God gap

By Stephen Cave

Religion may have lost much of its power to explain our modern world but we still crave its emotional satisfactions



The central third of 'Education' (1890), a stained glass window by Louis Comfort Tiffany and Tiffany Studios at Yale University. It depicts Science (Devotion, Labor, Truth, Research and Intuition) and Religion (Purity, Faith, Hope and Reverence) working in harmony

Religion for Atheists: A Non-Believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion, by Alain de Botton, *Hamish Hamilton*, RRP£18.99, 320 pages

The Importance of Religion: Meaning and Action in our Strange World, by Gavin Flood, *Wiley-Blackwell*, RRP£17.99, 272 pages

The Atheist's Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life without Illusions, by Alex Rosenberg, *Norton*, RRP£17.99, 352 pages

When the revolutionaries of France began building their new order, they knew it would have to include religion. Even the atheists among them saw that the people needed comforting rituals and sanctioned celebrations to usher them through life. The Christian God, however, had been sent to the guillotine; an alternative was required. Their answer was the Cult of Reason.

Just like old-style religion, the Cult had centres of worship, virtue-stiffening

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sermons and a calendar of festivities. These climaxed with the *Fête de la Raison* of November 1793, for which churches across France were renamed “Temples of Reason”. The altar of the Cathedral of Notre Dame was replaced with a model mountain, atop which a mini Greek temple stood dedicated “To Philosophy”. Beside it burnt the Torch of Truth and the lengthy proceedings culminated with the appearance of an attractive women dressed in red, white and blue embodying the Goddess of Reason.

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But the Cult proved short-lived, and as the revolution consumed itself, a chastened Catholicism crept back into France. The fundamental tension, however, remained unresolved: between, on the one hand, the views of an expanding educated class who saw the many holes in Christian doctrine, and on the other, the people’s need for guidance and meaning that the Church had long fulfilled.

This tension between religion’s intellectual implausibility and its emotional satisfactions remains unresolved to this day. As a result there is a pattern to western thinking on religion since the Enlightenment: first the intellectual classes gleefully declare God dead, then they set to worrying about what, if anything, is to fill the God-sized gap He leaves behind. The Cult of Reason was one answer to this puzzle. Now, after God’s recent execution at the hands of the New Atheists (Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and co), a number of thinkers are again asking whether, even in His absence, we need religion regardless.

Foremost among these is the writer Alain de Botton. His smart and stimulating new book, *Religion for Atheists*, is a sensitive analysis of the deeply human needs that faith meets. He offers practical suggestions for how secular society might learn from religious institutions, but dismisses those institutions themselves as intellectually discredited. It falls to Gavin Flood, the Oxford professor of religion, to mount a thoroughgoing defence of faith-based organisations. In *The Importance of Religion*, he argues that we need the world’s creeds to help us make sense of the human condition.



But not everyone agrees that there is something in religion that needs to be preserved post-God. The American philosopher Alex Rosenberg, for example, argues in *The Atheist’s Guide to Reality* that the faiths are dangerous delusions that we can entirely do without. His starting point is that the natural sciences tell us everything there is to know about the nature of reality: “the physical facts fix all the facts”, as he puts it. As he works out the implications of this over the course of the book, it becomes clear that his worldview leaves no room for religious sentiments.

The inspiring stories of the world’s holy books are about troubled souls courageously choosing the rugged path of righteousness over wickedness and temptation. But in a purely physical universe, argues Rosenberg, every assumption behind these stories must be rejected: we have no free will with which to choose between right and wrong; there is no objective moral truth anyway; and there is no soul or enduring self to do the choosing. The electrons

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and protons of which the world is made know no purpose, and “there is no place history is heading, except toward the maximum-entropy heat death of the universe”.

What the physical facts lead to, therefore, is nihilism – the belief that life is meaningless. But we need not worry that this will leave us paralysed in the face of an indifferent cosmos, Rosenberg argues, as evolution has provided us with powerful biological imperatives: “The notion that we need something to make life meaningful in order to keep living is another one of those illusions ... Like other mammals, we are programmed to get out of bed in the morning.” Nor need we worry that the abolition of religion will lead to moral degeneracy: we have evolved as social animals to be mostly decent to one another, he claims. Hence he describes his philosophy as one of “nice nihilism”.

Though most of these claims are (terrifyingly) true, *The Atheist's Guide to Reality* will do little to console those who fear the emotional void left by religion's demise. But if nihilism – even the nice sort – starts to get you down, Rosenberg has a solution. In his jaunty, hurried prose, he suggests that you simply “take two of whatever neuropharmacology prescribes”. We don't need religion: the God-sized gap in our lives, he believes, can be filled with Prozac.

You might be thinking that with friends like these, atheism doesn't need enemies. But of course it has plenty – and one of the most sophisticated is Gavin Flood. A leading scholar of Hinduism, Flood has a keen appreciation of how faith is embedded in the rhythms of the everyday. In *The Importance of Religion*, he defends rites and scriptures as a legitimate, if not essential, guide to life.

“The world is a mysterious place,” he argues, “which scientific accounts do not exhaust but rather serve to add to its mystery. Religions show us ways of inhabiting our strange world that are transformative for individuals and for communities as a whole.” He spells out these ways in chapters on the value of religion as it is acted out, for example, in pilgrimage and prayer or through its relations with art and politics. He concludes that the New Atheists, in attacking Biblical accounts of the creation or proofs of the existence of God, have misunderstood faiths, which “are not scientific propositions, but encounters with mystery and expressions of human needs that form ways of life”.

The Importance of Religion therefore encapsulates all that Rosenberg rejects. The concepts Flood uses – such as purpose and mystery – are those Rosenberg dismisses as delusional, and the thinkers he cites – such as Freud and Heidegger – are those Rosenberg believes to be charlatans. Most of all, Flood openly focuses on the subjective, emotional, first-person perspective of what it is like to be a human in the world. This is just the perspective that Rosenberg, in so embracing the third-person, objective view of science, denies any validity – wrongly, as even if fundamental aspects of the human experience (such as free will or a persisting self) are illusory, they remain our lived reality.



Flood is therefore right to emphasise the lived experience of religious practice. His portrayal of communities of believers drawing on centuries of accumulated wisdom to make the best of life's challenges is certainly more inviting than the injunction to take Prozac. *The Importance of Religion* is at its most convincing when it argues that the practical rituals of prayer, cleansing and communal eating can provide a shape to life that we desperately need, helping us to place our actions within a broader cosmological drama.

But Flood goes too far in focusing on the subjective view at the expense of the objective. It leads him to paste over the intellectual difficulties of belief, playing down, for example, some of the important areas of disagreement between science and faith, such as how evolutionary accounts of our development refute religious versions. And his argument that religions are rational as long as they are internally coherent is a limited idea of rationality, and yet still one that few religions would fulfil (the problem of evil, for example, being a notorious inconsistency at the heart of Christianity).

A balanced middle way between the extremes offered by Rosenberg and Flood would require negotiating between the hard truths of science and the lived reality of being. We must take the objective, intellectual view seriously (not least as, if we don't, the world has a habit of reminding us of its objective existence). But to lead a successful life, we must also take seriously the fact that we each have complex emotional needs stemming from a subjective viewpoint that will not simply disappear even when "disproved" by science. It is this middle way that de Botton takes in *Religion for Atheists*.

Although raised "in a committedly atheistic household, as the son of two secular Jews who placed religious belief somewhere on a par with an attachment to Santa Claus", de Botton has a keen appreciation of what religion has to offer. His book is an elegant and witty inquiry into what we can learn from the glaring fact that religions continue to flourish even though most of their claims about the nature of things have long been shown to be, well, not really true.

He asks, for example, "not whether the Virgin exists, but what it tells us about human nature that so many Christians over two millennia have felt the need to invent her". His answer, a theme of the book, is that we are less grown-up than liberal societies assume we are and frequently in need of guidance, reassurance and tenderness. The Church has never been afraid to shepherd us through life – unlike secular institutions, which can seem remote and uncaring. Whereas New Atheists such as Dawkins argue that such shepherding is infantilising, de Botton believes secular society should learn from religion and be unafraid to acknowledge its needy side.

Take universities, for example. A liberal education is supposed to impart wisdom and self-knowledge, readying young people for life – but you wouldn't think it from a glance at the syllabus. Unconnected and abstract courses – on medieval Germany or Joyce's use of pronouns – are taught in ways that reflect academic specialisms rather than students' needs. Instead lectures should be more like religious sermons, de Botton suggests, preparing us to meet life's challenges, such as how to overcome selfishness, connect with nature or face illness. The teaching too could learn from the faithful: lecturers should be "sent to be trained by African-American Pentecostal preachers". To his credit, de Botton is trying to put these ideas into practice in London's "School of Life", a venue for philosophical discussion of which he is a co-founder.

There are plenty more such ideas in *Religion for Atheists*, some serious, such as a secular equivalent of the Jewish Day of Atonement when we might seek forgiveness from those we have wronged; some more frivolous, like the annual orgiastic “Feast of Fools” in which we could vent our need for debauchery. To those who wrestle with their faith, this insouciance will seem arrogant. But one accusation often made against such attempts by intellectuals to impose a faux-faith – that it patronises the masses – cannot be levelled against de Botton: the book does not so much suggest that the unruly rabble needs religion, as that he himself desperately misses its comforts and consolations.

Convinced believers will of course wonder why he wants the scraps that fall to the floor when he could be sitting at the table. But for the unconvinced, this is a timely and perceptive appreciation of how much wisdom is embodied in religious traditions and how we godless moderns might learn from it.

After all, stealing the best ideas of other faiths is itself a venerable religious tradition. The great creeds have never been afraid to appropriate rituals, saints or myths from earlier belief systems – even Christmas and Easter, Christianity’s two most important festivals, are revamped versions of older rites. Secular society too should therefore be unembarrassed about adopting what is best from the believers. It is time for a new Cult of Reason.

Stephen Cave is a writer and philosopher based in Berlin. His book ‘Immortality’ is published in April by Random House (US) and Biteback (UK)

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Kieran M | January 22 12:46am | [Permalink](#)

[Report](#)

Very interesting. As someone who calls himself a Born Again Atheist, this brings up a few issues that I have wondered about for some time.

Firstly, there is a concerning tendency with philosophers of all stripes to assume, in language if not in thought, that what applies to them and those around them should somehow apply to all of humanity. Words such as “we need this” or “humanity needs that” can, if overused, gloss over the incredible diversity in individual needs and world views. For example, I do not need the comfort of religion to give my life meaning, as I find the freedom to give my life meaning incredibly liberating. And yet, that freedom doesn't result in me suffering moral decay, because I consider that morality, honour and self-sacrifice are all forms of enlightened self-interest.

But this is a subtle viewpoint, without which the ideas of atheism could cause huge damage if thrust on people whose world view is unprepared for life without the moral guidance of their deity. We should be careful about how misinterpreted atheistic ideas might interact with people with an utterly different character or world view. The New Atheist in particular, especially my idol Dawkins, must beware of this risk if they try to shatter peoples' dearly-held beliefs. We only need to look at the boss of Enron using The Selfish Gene to justify his crimes, much to Dawkins's horror.

Secondly, following on from the above, religion may be an essential part of the development of the

human mind. Would, or do, children brought up as atheists have the same strength of conscience as we atheists who, during our childhood, believed in a religion? The modern "mainstream middle class" (for want of a better term) way of bringing up children has been to expose them to religion and allow - even encourage - them to believe, but to teach them powers of reasoning so that as they turn to adulthood they are able to challenge their childhood assumptions and, if they so wish, turn to atheism without losing faith in life or the need for morality.

Simply arguing that we are "evolved" to be moral, constructive members of society is in my view an incredibly simplistic, naive argument. Throughout our evolution our species has always had the crutch of religion to guide the development of our children. A "post-modern" way (again, for want of better words; I hate that phrase as I have always considered it to be a contradiction in terms) might be to take religion entirely out of childrens' upbringing, yet I think this could have hugely dangerous unforeseen consequences if it is not replaced with another, equally powerful, crutch to aid children's mental development.

If we want to encourage people to turn to reason and question religion, we need to realise that religion provides pre-packaged belief system. Many people are unwilling to spend - or to be blunt some are not capable of spending - years reading, thinking and doubting in order to create their own personal structured world view. In the same way that most people want to buy a pre-built house without concerning them with the details of its design and architecture, or to buy a pre-built car without thought to its mechanics, many people are the same when it comes to their outlook of life. That religion provides such a package is both its greatest strength for people of a certain persuasion, while being its greatest weakness for others. That atheism does not provide a belief package is, I believe, what many people find so threatening about it.

I suggest that the next stage in the development of the atheistic, reason-loving world view is to provide such a pre-packaged belief system. This may seem like a contradiction in terms for an ideal based on constant questioning of everything, and there is of course the risk of creating a doctrine that undermines such essential questioning thoughts. If we are honest though such a belief system, which mostly strikes the right balance, already exists for those of us who are already unwitting members of the Cult of Reason. It just needs codifying in simple everyday terms.

Far harder, but equally necessary, is to replace the social structures and benefits of religion with secular ones. Many agnostics, even atheists, attend church for the social aspect rather than reasons of belief; the only replacements secularism has to offer tend to be far narrower and less diverse interest or hobby groups. It's interesting to know that the French revolutionaries attempted just that.

I believe that if we are to usher in a new Cult of Reason we must refrain from assuming that others can create an atheistic and moral world view for themselves unaided, so we must endeavour to replace the crutches that religion provides for our society with a package of secular alternatives so that the people can discard creation myths without discarding the things that truly give life meaning.

RBA22 - DC | January 21 5:38pm | [Permalink](#)

[Report](#)

As modern physics creates new and more fantastic metaphysical myths to explain quantum, relativistic cosmology, the metaphors of science approach the transcendental metaphors of religion. The convergence only needs a simple lexicon to translate between the realms of reason and the faith. At their core, they are equivalent. One can believe in the "Higgs field" or a "creator God." I can't speak to or find comfort in a Higgs field, but I can with a creator God.

helen li | January 21 12:51pm | [Permalink](#)

[Report](#)

This review is so enlightening. I am looking forward to Stephen Cave's Book

Ranmore | January 21 12:43pm | [Permalink](#)

[Report](#)

"Religion may have lost much of its power to explain our modern world but we still crave its emotional satisfactions "

Speak for yourself. The cosmos may be "indifferent" but that doesn't stop it from being awe inspiring.

S. Lee | January 21 8:12am | [Permalink](#)

[Report](#)

The false dichotomy between reason and religion is based on a misunderstanding of how our brains work. While we have a rational, logical and 'factual' part; we also have a creative, metaphoric and emotional part as well as an instinctive part. Much of what appears in most religious traditions are metaphors and particular historically resonant descriptions of fundamental human questions. Both science and religion are searches for knowledge. It is just the particular form that they take that is different. If you look at neuroscience and physics, for example, you can see how close they are coming to various religious descriptions of how we and the universe operate.

